



March 17, 2006—Happy St. Patrick’s Day

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## **NOAA Gulf of Mexico News**

### ***Environmental Impact Statement for Mission-Aransas NERR in Today's Federal Register***

The final Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed Mission-Aransas National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) in Texas will be published in the Federal Register today, Friday, March 17. This is one of the final steps before the reserve can be officially designated. Mission-Aransas, located in Aransas and Refugio Counties about 30 miles northeast of Corpus Christi on the Texas coast, will be the 27th reserve in the National Estuarine Research Reserve System. With 185,708 acres, Mission-Aransas will be the third-largest reserve in the system. It is also the first reserve on the western Gulf Coast. A designation ceremony is scheduled for May 6 in Port Aransas. For more information, contact [Matt Chasse](#).

### ***Readily Available Commercial Landing Trends Indicate Changing Estuarine Habitat Quality***

New analysis by [National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science](#) scientists shows that trends in landings in the Gulf of Mexico panaeid shrimp fisheries serve as indicators of the quality of the shrimps' estuarine habitats over time, an example of how coastal managers can use readily available commercial landings data as a measure of environmental quality. Recently completed analysis of landings trends in Florida Bay indicate diminished habitat quality since the mid-1980s, while landing trends in Louisiana and Texas reveal either increasing habitat quality or no change over the past 44 years. As described in *Gulf of Mexico Science* (December 2005), the shrimp stocks are fully exploited and landings are a direct measure of stock. Since panaeid are an annual species, landings are also a measure of recruitment, which is dependent on habitat quality. For more information, contact [Tom.Oconnor@noaa.gov](mailto:Tom.Oconnor@noaa.gov).

### ***New Release of ArcMap Tools for NOAA's ESI Maps***

Four tools designed to assist with the viewing and querying of NOAA's Environmental Sensitivity Index (ESI) maps were released this week. These tools work within ESRI's ArcMap product and are for use with atlases published as a geodatabase. Virginia, the first ESI available in this format, was released last month. An updated DVD for that region including the tools and an upgraded geodatabase has been distributed. All future ESIs will be published as a geodatabase and an effort will be made to migrate some of the existing ESI atlases to this format as well. The available tools enable automated links to the biology database tables, query building capabilities, report generation, and a simple metadata viewer. For more information on the tools, visit <http://response.restoration.noaa.gov/esitoolkit> or contact [Jill Petersen](#).

### ***NCCOS Scientists Develop Method to Predict Toxicity in Grass Shrimp***

Scientists from NOAA's National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science have developed a rapid method to predict toxicity in grass shrimp following exposure to organophosphate insecticides that are widely used in agricultural and urban environments. The scientists were able to predict the toxicity by measuring the

activity of an enzyme (acetylcholinesterase) in the shrimp. Grass shrimp are an ecologically important crustacean species in salt-marsh ecosystems and are sensitive to contaminants, including these common insecticides. The finding was published in the March 2006 issue of the journal *Ecotoxicology and Environmental Safety*. For more information, contact [Pete Key](#).

## ***GIS Training for Florida's Coastal Resource Managers***

The Coastal Services Center will provide introductory and intermediate geographic information system (GIS) training to Florida's coastal resource management community from March 14-17 in Tallahassee, FL. Representatives from 14 different state offices will learn the basics of GIS technology and its application to coastal management issues. The courses will be hosted by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Office of Coastal and Aquatic Managed Areas. For more information, contact [Steve Walker](#).

## ***Gulf Council to Convene its Regularly Scheduled Meeting in Mobile, Alabama***

Tampa, Florida – February 27, 2006 - The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) will meet March 20 - 23, 2006 at the Radisson Admiral Semmes, 251 Government Street, Mobile Alabama 36602. On the agenda are several issues of interest, including the final outcome of the Red Snapper IFQ Referendum, the results of which will determine whether that fishery moves from a limited access system to an Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) system.

Also related to the red snapper fishery is the options paper for Reef Fish Amendment 27/Shrimp 14. Scoping meetings for the proposed amendment were held in January. More than 500 citizens and industry representatives attended the meetings held throughout the Gulf coast. The options paper will include alternatives for Council consideration, such as a possible reduction in total allowable catch (TAC), along with other regulatory changes designed to keep the stock on track with its rebuilding plan. The scoping document for Draft Amendment 15 to the Shrimp Fishery Management Plan (FMP) will also be reviewed. That amendment considers shrimp limits on trawling gear, shrimp restrictions on the transfer of vessel permits, and possible area closures for shrimp. Public comments from the scoping meetings will be reviewed for both proposed amendments.

In addition, two items concerning the grouper fishery will be discussed - the first, a report by the Socioeconomic Panel (SEP) regarding TAC issues for grouper. Grouper allocation became an issue last year when the Council began developing a regulatory amendment to aid in the recovery of that fishery. During its January meeting, the Council took the first step toward establishing a grouper allocation among the recreational and commercial fishing sectors and agreed to convene its SEP to recommend the socioeconomic models and other information the Council should use in setting those allocations.

The second item is the grouper IFQ issue. The Ad Hoc Grouper IFQ Advisory Panel (AHGIFQAP) held its first meeting and has begun assembling a broad list of recommendations regarding the scope and general configuration of a Dedicated Access Privilege (DAP) system for the commercial grouper fishery. The panel will present its first report to the Reef Fish Management Committee Wednesday, March 22, 2006. Additionally, Council staff has developed a discussion paper for the Committee's consideration.

Public testimony is scheduled for Wednesday, March 22, 2006, from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 a.m. and will be accepted on the following issues: Reef Fish Amendment 26 - Red Snapper Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ), Exempted Fishing Permits (if any). Immediately following public testimony, the Council will hold

its first open public comment session for citizens to address the Council on fishery issues that may not be on the agenda. Comments will be heard from 4:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Also on Wednesday, NOAA Fisheries Service will hold a public workshop to provide a general demonstration of the on-line capabilities to implement the Red Snapper Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) System. This presentation, which begins at 6:30 p.m., is solely for the purpose of soliciting input from the Council and potential users of the system in an effort to make the tool user friendly, concise and responsive to Reef Fish Amendment 26.

Thursday's agenda includes Council deliberation and action on committee recommendations established earlier in the week. For a complete agenda or for copies of documents pertaining to any of these issues call or E-mail the Council offices. Anyone wishing to testify before the Council should register prior to the start of the scheduled public comment period.

### ***NOAA Introduces New Version of nowCOAST Web Mapping Portal Displaying Real-time Coastal Information***

In a continuing effort to improve maritime safety and commerce through the monitoring of physical changes in weather, oceanographic and river conditions, NOAA launched an updated version of the popular nowCOAST Web portal. NowCOAST is a Web mapping portal providing coastal communities with real-time observations and NOAA forecasts. Read the [full press release](#).

## **In the Gulf States:**

### ***ADEM Sponsoring Stream and Wetlands Conference***

MONTGOMERY – The Alabama Stream and Wetlands Restoration Conference will be held April 6-7 at the Harrigan Forestry Center on the University of Mobile campus. The Alabama Department of Environmental Management is sponsoring the conference to provide technical assistance and training for regional, county and municipal regulatory and resource management staff. The conference will be divided into stream restoration and wetlands restoration, with each providing information and instruction on a variety of creative non-point source pollution control applications and new technologies for use in coastal streams, estuaries and wetlands.

Highlights of the conference will include a review of new and current environmental regulations, the debut of an innovative project that provides scientific and engineering data for referenced water bodies in Coastal Alabama, new non-point source stream mitigation guidance, discussions of soil dynamics as well as restoration success stories. Conference attendees will also be able to tour stream and wetlands restoration project sites.

Government officials, aquatic and environmental restoration specialists, resource management professionals and other interested individuals are invited to register for the conference. An early registration fee of \$50 is applicable until March 29. Checks or purchase orders are payable to the South Alabama Regional Planning Commission, P.O. Box 1665, Mobile, AL 36633, or phone (251) 433-6541.

## ***Living Marsh Boardwalk at Dauphin Island Sea Lab's Estuarium Re-Opens***

March 7, 2006--It's been an almost two-year ordeal, with a few major hurricanes intervening with the re-building process, but the Living Marsh Boardwalk at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, originally destroyed during September 2004's Hurricane Ivan, is finally open to the public.

This meandering boardwalk allows the public an up-close view of Mobile Bay and its floral and faunal inhabitants. Pelicans, seagulls, great blue herons, and many more coastal birds may take a leisurely morning stroll, on the lookout for a fish breakfast. Boats and ferries pass back and forth, and dolphins have even been spotted from the boardwalk's Ladner Pavilion.

"This is a wonderful place to learn about Mobile Bay and how it functions," notes Sea Lab K-12 Education Chair Dr. John Dindo. "We have interpretive signage that we are in the process of replacing that explains everything from where sand comes from, to how natural gas is extracted from the sea floor.

"Also, if you love bird-watching, this is an ideal locale for coastal and migratory bird spotting," he adds.

The Living Marsh that lies underneath the boardwalk was formerly an Air Force septic field. It was planted and nurtured as part of a research project by then-Sea Lab faculty member Dr. Judy Stout, currently a Mobile County Public School System Board Member. The Boardwalk is part of the Estuarium, the public aquarium of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab. Although the Estuarium is admission-based, the Boardwalk is free to the public.

## ***Florida's Waterways Littered with Abandoned Vessels in Wake of Funding Cuts***

*Date of Story: February 28, 2006 Source: The Orlando Sun-Sentinel Summary by: Megan Knott*

The number of submerged vessels in Florida's waterways is increasing every year, posing a major threat to the safety of other boaters and the environment. The annual hurricanes that sweep through Florida have littered the state's waterways with sunken vessels, and neither vessel owners nor the state are taking action to facilitate the clean up. Although no statewide counts have been officially released, the Florida Wildlife and Conservation Commission is conducting an investigation and so far determined that there are more than 300 abandoned vessels in the Florida Keys alone. The state has traditionally managed vessel removal operations, but in 2003 Florida legislators stopped funding the removal program. Because removal can cost anywhere from \$2,000 to \$10,000 per vessel, few local governments or organizations are capable of footing the bill. Although owners can face criminal charges and fines for abandoning vessels, they are often difficult to locate.

## ***Governor Bush Recognizes March as "Seagrass Awareness Month"***

-- Florida's seagrasses crucial to the environment and economy --

TALLAHASSEE - Recognizing the importance of seagrasses to Florida's marine environment, the commercial and recreational fishing industry and the economy, Governor Jeb Bush acknowledged March 2006 as Seagrass Awareness Month. "Florida's seagrasses support recreational and commercial communities throughout the State," said Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Secretary

Colleen M. Castille. “Preserving these underwater grasses is critical to the prosperity of Florida’s marine life, water quality and citizens.”

Seagrasses are flowering underwater grasses found in estuaries, lagoons and shallow, open shelves off Florida's coast. Florida is home to seven species of seagrasses, located throughout the state. A critical marine habitat, seagrasses provide a nursery ground for marine life and maintain water quality and clarity by stabilizing bottom sediments and filtering nutrients from stormwater run-off. Last year alone, seagrass communities throughout the state supported a commercial fish and shellfish harvest of \$109 million. Florida’s multi-million dollar fishing industry depends on healthy seagrasses to protect young fish and shellfish, coral reefs and other marine life, including sea turtles, manatees and wading birds. Recreational divers, snorkelers and fishing enthusiasts from around the world visit underwater Florida to experience the State’s world-class marine resources.

In 1998, local, state and federal agencies partnered with conservation groups and commercial and recreational fishermen to create the Florida Keys-based Seagrass Outreach Partnership, an organization formed to educate Florida boaters about the importance of seagrasses. An estimated 173,000 acres of Florida seagrasses are scarred from boat propellers. Impacts from boat groundings fragment the grass bed, restricting the movement of the marine life that rely on the habitat. Seagrasses can take up to a decade to recover from propeller scars. While affecting habitat, boating in seagrass beds can also damage vessel engines, hulls and propellers. Groundings that damage seagrass habitats are offenses subject to both federal and state fines, including civil penalties, damage assessment and habitat restoration costs and long-term monitoring of the restored site. To celebrate and promote Seagrass Awareness Month, DEP is participating in events across the state, including:

March 21, Baynanza, Miami

March 22, Seagrass Awareness Day, Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve, Apalachicola

March 25, Annual Miami Riverday, Jose Marti Park, Miami.

March 25, 6th Annual Seagrass Awareness Celebration, Shoreline Park South, Gulf Breeze

For more information on Florida’s seagrasses, visit <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/habitats/seagrass/>. View the [Governor’s proclamation](#) for Seagrass Awareness .

## ***Florida Releases 2006 South Florida Environmental Report***

-- Comprehensive report highlights successful Everglades restoration projects--

WEST PALM BEACH – The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) today released a comprehensive update of environmental projects in South Florida. The 2006 South Florida Environmental Report provides a detailed summary of Everglades restoration efforts and updates on the progress of other environmental programs in the Kissimmee Basin, Lake Okeechobee, estuaries and other coastal areas. “No other government has taken on a mission as large and as important as Everglades restoration,” said DEP Secretary Colleen M. Castille. “The 2006 South Florida Environmental Report delivers a comprehensive snapshot of Florida’s unprecedented success over the past year.”

The annual report documents the accomplishments of state and federal scientists, engineers, planners and program managers who are restoring the Everglades by reducing pollution and better managing the flow of water, while meeting the State’s flood control and water supply responsibilities. Consolidating information compiled from more than 50 separate reports, the 2006 South Florida Environmental Report

covers “water year 2005” (May 1, 2004 thru April 30, 2005). The report provides extensive research summaries, data analyses, financial updates and a searchable database of environmental projects.

Highlights of the 2006 South Florida Environmental Report include:

- Stormwater Treatment Areas (STAs) which have treated almost 1.5 million acre-feet of water and prevented 189 metric tons of phosphorus from reaching the Everglades in water year 2005 alone.
- Best Management Practices (BMPs) recorded its tenth consecutive year of outstanding results in reducing phosphorus inputs. The BMP program achieved a 59-percent phosphorus load reduction in the Everglades Agricultural Area this year, more than doubling the 25 percent required by law.
- To date, STAs and BMPs combined have prevented more than 2,178 metric tons of phosphorus from entering America’s Everglades.
- In October 2004, Governor Jeb Bush unveiled Acceler8 - a plan to accelerate the restoration of eight key environmental projects to be completed 10 years ahead of schedule.
- The millionth acre of melaleuca, an invasive exotic plant species, was cleared from the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Project (CERP) area in water year 2005.
- To date, more than 210,000 acres of land have been acquired for use in CERP.

“The 2006 South Florida Environmental Report is one of our agency’s most impressive annual documents,” said Carol Wehle, Executive Director of the SFWMD. “It showcases the first-rate science, engineering and water resource management that are making South Florida’s environmental restoration a reality.” Under the leadership of Governor Jeb Bush, Florida forged a 50-50 State-federal partnership to implement the \$8.4 billion Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and has invested \$1.3 billion and committed an additional \$3 billion through the end of the decade to clean up and restore the famed River of Grass. The 2006 South Florida Environmental Report, including a 52-page Executive summary, is available online at <http://www.sfwmd.gov/sfer/>.

## ***Florida DEP Awards Water Quality Restoration Grants***

--Grants assist local governments in stormwater management --

TALLAHASSEE - The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) recently awarded a total of \$9.3 million to ten local governments and two universities to reduce urban stormwater pollution to Florida’s priority impaired waterways. These funds are part of the Water Quality Restoration Grant Program established by the Florida Legislature in 2005 through passage of Senate Bill 444. “DEP is working with communities throughout Florida to retrofit outdated drainage systems and improve stormwater treatment,” said DEP Secretary Colleen M. Castille. “The funding made available by the Water Quality Restoration Grant Program allows the Department to expand partnerships with local governments, water management districts and other public entities to restore impaired waters.”

Untreated urban runoff from older drainage systems is a primary cause of pollution to many of Florida’s rivers, lakes and estuaries and the reason many of these surface waters have been determined to be impaired under the DEP’s Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) program. The TMDL program establishes the cause of impairment and works with local governments to develop and implement projects and programs to restore surface waters to healthy conditions.

The Water Quality Restoration Grant Program promotes cost-effective construction projects to clean up waterways. Grants are awarded to local governments for projects that are ready to proceed, who provide matching funds and who have established a dedicated recurring funding source for stormwater

management. Projects must be designed to reduce specific pollutant loads, such as nitrogen and phosphorus, that cause the water body's impairment. Once complete, projects are typically monitored after storm events to document their effectiveness in removing pollutants. "We are pleased that DEP has another program available to local governments to clean up Florida's surface waters and preserve them for the future," said Mimi Drew, Director of DEP's Division of Water Resource Management.

Under the leadership of Governor Bush and the Florida Legislature, Florida has invested almost \$2 billion to improve wastewater treatment, clean up stormwater pollution and upgrade drinking water facilities, funding more than 950 projects statewide since 1999. For more information on the TMDL Water Quality Restoration Grant Program, visit [http://www.dep.state.fl.us/water/watersheds/tmdl\\_grant.htm](http://www.dep.state.fl.us/water/watersheds/tmdl_grant.htm).

## ***Safer Growth in Coastal Louisiana Topic- Second Presidents' Forum***

A March 23 seminar on planning for safer growth in coastal Louisiana will be accessible online. The Presidents' Forum on Meeting Coastal Challenges can be viewed at <http://mediasite.lsuagcenter.net/mediasite/viewer/?peid=5603cc3c-b9e0-40f9-9043-67befed92284>.

The live Webcast begins at 8 a.m., but presentations made during the day will be archived online and available for viewing at leisure. Presenters at the 2006 Forum include Mark Davis, executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana; Marc Levitan, director of the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center; Dennis Hwang, an internationally recognized coastal zone management expert and attorney from Hawaii; John Lopez, director of the Coastal Sustainability Program of the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation; Charlotte Randolph, president of the Lafourche Parish Council; and Randy Roach, mayor of the City of Lake Charles. Mike Jacobs, publisher of the Grand Forks Herald, also will discuss the North Dakota city's recovery process following a 1997 flood.

As Louisiana continues to pursue long-term coastal restoration goals, it is only fitting that its universities take a lead role in addressing the near-term, politically sensitive and economically challenging implications of the state's coastal land loss problem. With that objective in mind, the Louisiana Sea Grant College Program, LSU Systems Office and LSU Agricultural Center convened the first Presidents' Forum on Meeting Coastal Challenges in January 2005.

At the January forum, scientists gave a stark assessment of the status of wetland loss, hurricane vulnerability, subsidence, spatial data and coastal resource economics to state and local leaders. The second chapter of the Forum, held in June 2005, offered parish and state policymakers insights from Florida's hurricane experiences and served as a springboard for discussion about Louisiana's vulnerabilities. The third component of the Forum was held in October when Hwang conducted a seminar on reducing risks from coastal hazards. Information about the Presidents' Forum is available online at [www.laseagrant.org](http://www.laseagrant.org).

**What:** Presidents' Forum on Meeting Coastal Challenges: Planning for Safer Growth in Coastal Louisiana

**When:** March 23, 2006, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

**Where:** Available for viewing online (live and rebroadcast) at

<http://mediasite.lsuagcenter.net/mediasite/viewer/?peid=5603cc3c-b9e0-40f9-9043-67befed92284>

**Contact:** Roy Kron, (225) 578-6564, [rkron@lsu.edu](mailto:rkron@lsu.edu)

## ***Louisiana Coastal Projects Booklet Available***

The Louisiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has published its Coastal Restoration Annual Project Reviews: December 2005 Report. The 95-page document has information on all coastal restoration projects in Louisiana and provides a short summary of current efforts to protect, conserve, restore, and enhance the state's coastal wetlands.

The booklet is subdivided into four primary sections based on projects in geographic planning regions of the state. The majority of the restoration projects listed were built and funded under the Breaux Act, also known as CWPPRA. Information can be found on project location, features, acres of land benefited, costs, and funding source.

DNR's Office of Coastal Restoration and Management's Restoration Technology Section prepared and published this latest report. For inquiries and copies, please contact Susan Hill at 225-342-1359 or [Susan.Hill@la.gov](mailto:Susan.Hill@la.gov). The document can also be downloaded online at [www.dnr.louisiana.gov/crm](http://www.dnr.louisiana.gov/crm) in Adobe® PDF format.

## ***Revised Sea Grant Legal Website Launched***

The Louisiana Sea Grant Legal program (LSGL) has launched a redesign of its Website - [www.lsu.edu/sglegal](http://www.lsu.edu/sglegal). Visitors to the site can access copies of Louisiana Coastal Law, a biannual publication of LSGL; law journal articles; presentations and information on the program's current and completed research; and links to legal issues and agencies affecting the Louisiana coastal zone. The new site also incorporates easier navigation, a search engine function and the design elements of the Louisiana Sea Grant home site ([www.laseagrant.org](http://www.laseagrant.org)), which was redesigned in fall 2005. The mission of the Sea Grant Legal Program is to provide timely and relevant legal information and services for the many users of Louisiana's coastal lands and waters. Contact: Roy Kron, (225) 578-6564 [rkron@lsu.edu](mailto:rkron@lsu.edu).

## ***Texas Coastal Coordination Council Welcomes Two New Members***

--James R. Matz of Harlingen and John L. Sullivan sworn in today

AUSTIN — Jerry Patterson, Commissioner of the Texas General Land Office and chairman of the Coastal Coordination Council, swore in two new members of the Coastal Coordination Council Thursday, March 16. Gov. Rick Perry appointed James R. Matz of Harlingen and John L. Sullivan of Galveston as members of the Council until 2007. They took the Oath of Office at the start of the council meeting at 1 p.m. in Room 170 of the Stephen F. Austin Building at 1700 North Congress.

The Coastal Coordination Council oversees the federally approved Texas Coastal Management Program, which manages the state's coastal zone. This coastal zone includes all or part of 18 coastal counties and more than 8 million acres of land and water. The Council also awards \$1.8 million annually in grants for coastal projects. As Land Commissioner, Patterson serves as chairman of the Council.

"Texas is finally stepping up to fight coastal erosion and face the challenges of increasing development along the coast," Patterson said. "On behalf of the council, I welcome these two professionals to our ranks as we face this challenge."

Matz is founder of the Valley Proud Environmental Council, which he has served as chairman of for the past 16 years. Matz also is a former Cameron County commissioner. His career includes 15 years as a Commissioned Foreign Service officer for the U.S. State Department, five years as a marketing executive for Fluor Engineers and Constructors and 24 years as a business owner in Harlingen. Sullivan is a rancher. He owns Galveston's Sullivan Land and Cattle Company and is president of Sullivan Properties, a residential and commercial development company. He is a member of the board of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association. Sullivan is former vice president and part owner of Sullivan Enterprises, Inc., and former president and part owner of Texas International Terminals, which is a private port facility for handling cargo for ships and barges. Sullivan also serves as founding director and board member of the Bank of the West. He is a member of the Galveston College Board of Regents and served on the Galveston City Council from 1984 to 1987. More information on the Coastal Coordination Council, as well as its meeting schedule, may be found at <http://www.glo.state.tx.us/coastal/ccc.html>.

### ***Galveston Bay Estuary Program to Receive Fisheries and Habitat Conservation Award in Washington, D.C.***

The Galveston Bay Estuary Program will receive the first Fisheries and Habitat Conservation Partner Award from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at an awards luncheon on Mar. 9 in Washington D.C. This award recognizes fisheries and habitat conservation partners whose work clearly provides significant benefits to the American people and honors those who are working to sustain and enhance fish, wildlife, and their habitats.

Helen Drummond, estuary program director and John Huffman of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Texas Coastal Program will receive the award on behalf of the Estuary Program's Natural Resource Uses Subcommittee. Over the last ten years, the subcommittee has conducted dozens of individual habitat and wildlife conservation projects with partners, implementing the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan for Galveston Bay. Since 1995, the Estuary Program and its partners have collaborated on projects protecting, enhancing, and restoring over 8,000 acres of wetlands and important coastal habitats. Projects include; creating, restoring, and conserving wetlands, beneficial uses of dredge material, restoring oyster reefs, reducing shoreline erosion, restoring sea grass and coastal prairies, protecting freshwater inflows and bird habitats, managing invasive plant and animal species, and research.

To find out about more about the Galveston Bay Estuary Program, please call (281) 218-6461 or visit: <http://www.gbep.state.tx.us/>.

## **Other News**

### ***Computers Utilized for Quickly Checking Fish Mercury Levels***

March 02, 2006 — By Gwen Schoen, Sacramento Bee

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Pacific Seafood, a wholesale distributor in Sacramento, Monday became the first seafood processor in the nation to offer its customers the option of testing the level of mercury in the fish they purchase. The testing system, called Safe Harbor, was developed by Micro Analytical Systems Inc. The computer-based testing system makes it possible to quickly and affordably test fish for mercury levels before it leaves the processing plant on its way to grocery stores and restaurants.

Malcolm Wittenberg, a chemical engineer and CEO of MASI, a five-person company based in San Rafael, says his wife challenged him to come up with an answer for consumers who are concerned about how much mercury they consume. "My wife subscribes to various health and parenting magazines," Wittenberg said. "She kept reading cautions about the mercury levels in fish and how women and young children should avoid certain fish. One day she said, 'Malcolm, you should do something about this.'"

Wittenberg worked with Canadian scientists over a period of five years. Last week, they were ready to install the first computer at Pacific Seafood and begin testing. Dan Nelson, vice president of MASI, was conducting the final installation tests and training Pacific Seafood staff before the system was launched. "You simply insert the needle into the fish, remove a core sample and insert the needle into the computer console," Nelson explained. "The computer does an analysis and prints the results on the screen in one minute. The fish is then tagged that it meets or is below the government standard. It's such a simple process that it takes very little training to do the test."

Chuck Holman, account manager at Pacific Seafood, said his company is excited about the prospects. "Up until now we have had the ability to test seafood, but it was very costly and it took a week or more to get the results," he said. "Malcolm's system is so easy to use and fast that we are able to test fish right here in the plant."

#### *Could scare customers off*

Holiday Quality Foods is the first grocery store to began offering mercury-tested fish to its customers. The market, based in Cottonwood, near Red Bluff, has 19 Northern California stores, including one in Auburn. The decision to call attention to mercury levels in fish was heavily weighed by executives at Holiday. Nearly all fish and shellfish contain traces of mercury. Reminding customers of that, even if the fish is below the maximum government approved levels, could cause some customers to flee from the fish case. "Our customers know it's out there and they are concerned," said Dave Parrish, director of perishables for Holiday markets. "Now we have a way of addressing it and offering information to help them make informed decisions. They will have confidence that the fish they purchase has been certified by Safe Harbor and it contains mercury levels below what the government has determined to be acceptable."

Parrish says the labeling on tested fish will not list exact amounts of mercury, but will indicate that the fish has been tested and is below acceptable maximum levels. "Consumers can go to the Safe Harbor Web site ([www.safeharborfoods.com](http://www.safeharborfoods.com)) and look for the exact amounts allowed by the government," Parrish said.

Wittenberg says that the EPA and National Academy of Sciences recommends that adults consume no more than 1 microgram of mercury for every 22 pounds of body weight per day. "A typical 6-ounce serving of albacore tuna would give a 45-pound child four times the amount of mercury considered safe for a week," Wittenberg said. "A 180-pound man eating the same can of albacore tuna would also exceed his weekly limit." After tested fish has been available in the Holiday stores for a month, Parrish said focus groups will offer feedback on the program. "We look at this as something similar to our organics program," Parrish said. "Customers asked for more organic foods because they were concerned about the environment and contaminants in their diets. Mercury testing will allow them to take that concern a step further." The cost to Holiday markets for testing the fish is about 30 cents per pound, which Parrish says will not be passed on to the customers. "We have to see what kind of response we get and how much time it requires," Parrish said. "Remember, these tested fish will be kept segregated as they go through the processing system. Each will be assigned a number so that they can be tracked. All of that does add to the cost." Benefits outweigh worries

Dietitians fear that being made aware of the mercury content in fish might backfire and cause consumers to switch to less-healthy protein choices. Jeannie Moloo, a Roseville dietitian and national spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, said as long as consumers are aware of the types of fish and the quantities they eat, the benefits of eating fish outweigh the problems with mercury contamination. "The American Heart Association recommends two 3-ounce servings a week because of the heart benefits," Moloo said. "There are studies which suggest that there are certain mechanisms in fish that fight inflammation and cause blood cells to be less sticky, which means blood would be less likely to form clots. It is not just a matter of substituting lower-fat fish for a higher-fat protein in your diet. Fish can help lower blood pressure and may reduce levels of triglycerides."

### *Government standards*

The stand of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on eating fish, as found on the Web site [www.cfsan.fda.gov](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov): "Fish and shellfish are an important part of a healthy diet. Fish and shellfish contain high-quality protein and other essential nutrients, are low in saturated fat and contain omega-3 fatty acids. A well-balanced diet that includes a variety of fish and shellfish can contribute to heart health and children's proper growth and development. So, women and young children in particular should include fish or shellfish in their diets due to the many nutritional benefits. "However, nearly all fish and shellfish contain traces of mercury. For most people, the risk from mercury by eating fish and shellfish is not a health concern. Yet, some fish and shellfish contain higher levels of mercury that may harm an unborn baby or young child's developing nervous system. The risks from mercury in fish and shellfish depend on the amount of fish and shellfish eaten and the levels of mercury in the fish and shellfish. Therefore, the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency are advising women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers and young children to avoid some types of fish and eat fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury."

The FDA and EPA say king mackerel, shark, swordfish and tilefish have higher levels of mercury and should be avoided by women of childbearing age and young children. In addition, this same group should eat no more than 6 ounces of tuna steak or canned white albacore tuna per week because of mercury contamination.

## **Energy**

### ***Senate Passes Bill Authorizing Oil Exploration in Gulf of Mexico South of Pensacola***

*Date of Story: March 8, 2006 Source: The Miami Herald Summary By: Megan Knott*

On March 8, 2006, the Senate Energy Committee, with a vote of 16 to 5, approved a bill that would open 3.6 million acres in the Gulf of Mexico south of Pensacola, Florida to oil and gas exploration. Although the Committee Chairman, Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM), acknowledged that the area would not provide a long-term energy source, he did promise the legislation would lower gas prices and provide more access to natural gas. Senator Mel Martinez (R-FL) opposed the bill on the grounds that it offers Florida no permanent protection from oil spills and could place oil rigs dangerously close to local beaches, a risky undertaking for a state with a tourism-dependent economy. Drilling is currently banned within 100 miles of the coast and Martinez favors a separate Senate bill that would extend the ban to 150 miles.

## ***MMS Adds Florida to Public Meetings Schedule for Development of OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Program Environmental Impact Statement***

WASHINGTON, D.C. - The Minerals Management Service (MMS) has added a meeting in Tallahassee, Florida to its schedule of public scoping meetings on the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the 2007-2012 Proposed 5-Year OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Program. The purpose of this meeting is to solicit comments on the scope of both the overall 5-year plan EIS as well as a separate EIS for the tentatively scheduled 2007-2012 oil and gas leasing proposals in the Western and Central Gulf of Mexico off the States of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. "MMS wishes to elicit the views of the public on the environmental issues associated with the 5-year oil and gas leasing program," said MMS Director Johnnie Burton. "This meeting, in addition to those already scheduled, will help us expand the opportunity for input from all interested parties in the Gulf of Mexico area."

The public scoping meeting will be held from 1-3 p.m. on April 6, 2006 at the Tallahassee-Leon County Civic Center at 505 West Pensacola Street in Tallahassee, Florida. The meeting is in addition to public scoping meetings in Alaska, Virginia, Texas, Louisiana and Alabama previously announced by MMS in the Federal Register on March 3, 2006 and March 7, 2006. The lease sales in the draft proposed program will constitute a significant element of the national energy strategy. The MMS requests comments on information regarding issues and alternatives that should be evaluated in the EIS, including significant environmental issues concerning OCS oil and gas leasing, exploration, and development. The comments will be reviewed by the MMS to help determine the scope of the EIS.

Current presidential withdrawals or congressional moratoria have placed more than 85 percent of the Outer Continental Shelf around the lower 48 states off limits to energy development. The Administration has indicated support for the moratorium, but will give great weight to the comments from adjacent coastal states. The Sale 181 area, which has significant potential oil and gas resources, is not under moratorium. Nevertheless, the MMS has no intention of offering for leasing areas within 100 miles of the Florida coast that used to be part of the Eastern Gulf Planning Area.

MMS will accept written comments on the scope of the EIS's for the proposed 2007-2012 OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Program through April 11, 2006. Those interested may submit comments electronically through MMS's Public Connect on-line commenting system at <https://ocsconnect.mms.gov>, or by mail to Mr. James Bennett, Chief, Branch of Environmental Assessment, Minerals Management Service, 381 Elden Street, Mail Stop 4042, Herndon, Virginia 20170. The schedule for public scoping meetings for the development of the proposed 5-year OCS leasing program EIS can be found at <http://www.gomr.mms.gov/homepg/whatsnew/newsreal/2006/060310.pdf>.

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